

Provincial Advocate
for Children & Youth

RESOURCES.
CONNECTION.
VOICE.

WHAT YOUTH IN PROVINCIAL CARE
NEED TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE

A REPORT FROM ONTARIO'S OFFICE OF THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH

A Message from the Provincial Advocate

As the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, I have the honour of serving young people who are in the care of The Province of Ontario, or who are on the margins of provincial care. These children and youth are connected to the child welfare system, to the youth justice system or to our mental health system. They are First Nations children. They are those living with special needs. They are children studying in the province's schools for the deaf and schools for the blind. And while I have seen them display tremendous courage and achieve their dreams, I have also seen how often the odds are stacked against them.

Those who rely on the province to parent them often grow up without stable families of their own and must go without many of the things most Ontarians take for granted. And because they have a degree of invisibility that stems from social exclusion, when they try to speak up about their unmet needs, their voices often go unheard.

This is where my office comes in. We listen to these young people and find ways to amplify their voices. Personally, I have spent over 25 years walking side-by-side with youth through some very trying circumstances – first in my roles as manager and director for two Toronto-area youth-serving agencies and, since 2008 as the Provincial Advocate. What I have learned about the conditions they need to thrive hasn't been gleaned from books or gathered through lectures. Instead, young people themselves have been my guides.

It is my hope that the framework provided by this report will help government Ministries, youth workers, and all individuals who come into contact with the youth in my mandate to think more holistically about what they need to succeed – and then to do their part to provide it. After all, these are the province's children we're talking about. We all share in the responsibility of parenting them. And, like any parent, it is our responsibility to put their interests first.

Irwin Elman
Provincial Advocate

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Introduction

“What young people need—in fact, what we all need—can be summed up in three simple words: resources, connection and voice.”

Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth

The Advocate's Office is an independent office of the Legislature of Ontario. Taking a "rights-based" approach to advocacy, it operates using the principles defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and receives and responds to concerns from children, youth and families who are seeking or receiving services under the Child and Family Services Act and the Education Act (Provincial and Demonstration Schools).

The Advocate's Office was established under the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act, 2007. This legislation states that the office is authorized to:

- a) Provide an independent voice for children and youth... by partnering with them to bring issues forward;
- b) Encourage communication and understanding between children and families and those who provide them with services;
- c) Educate children, youth and their caregivers regarding the rights of children and youth...and;
- d) Be an exemplar for meaningful participation of children and youth through all aspects of advocacy services.

The Office supports children and youth to have their voices heard in decisions that effect them. When a young person calls, the staff listens. They make an advocacy plan together. Then, with the young person's consent, they act. The Advocate's Office also undertakes systemic advocacy – for example, reviewing group homes about which they have heard many complaints and putting together reports recommending changes. (For more information, visit www.provincialadvocate.on.ca)

Sometimes we think that children have a hard time speaking up but, more often than not, it's adults who have a hard time listening.

This is especially true when it comes to listening to some of our most vulnerable children and youth. These are young people in provincial care or on the margins of provincial care. They include those who are connected to the child welfare system, to the youth justice system, to our mental health systems, as well as children and youth from First Nations communities and those living with special needs.

Children and youth living in our systems are, by definition, the province's children and responsibility. The province, by bringing them into care, has made a commitment to act as their parent on behalf of all Ontarians. Often coming from difficult circumstances and lacking stable families, they need society's care and attention more than most and, yet, they tend to have a degree of invisibility and are often forgotten. Art Lockart, a professor at Humber College, once expressed that the young people in our systems were "lost in plain sight."

These are the young people who are served through the mandate of Ontario's Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (the Advocate's Office). Walking side-by-side with these youth, the office has learned about the conditions that must be met if they are to reach their full potential. And while achieving these conditions for every young person in the province's care will be no easy task, the concepts themselves are not difficult to understand. What our most vulnerable young people need to succeed – in fact, what we all need – can be summed up in three simple words: resources, connection and voice.

*Resources:
Providing The Basics
& Beyond*

Providing **resources** sends a message to our children. It shows them that we **believe** they are **worth** investing in, that they are **valued**, and that we know they can achieve great things.

¹ Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, CIS – 2008, Table K5-2 in Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (2011, February 1); p. 15.

² Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (2010); p. 36.

³ Keller, E., Cusick, T., Gretchen, R. & Courtney, M.E. (2007). Approaching the transition to adulthood: Distinctive profiles of adolescents aging out of the child welfare system. *Social Service Review*, 81(3), 454-484.

⁴ Manitoba's Office of the Children's Advocate. (2007). 45 Recommendations Made to Improve the Plight of Youth Leaving the Child Welfare System. Press Release and Backgrounder; p. 1.

⁵ See: Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M. (2010). Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24. Chicago: Chapin Hall; Reid, C. and Dudding, P. (2006). Building a Future Together: Issues and Outcomes for Transition-Aged Youth. Ottawa, ON: Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare.

⁶ This rate was 48% when not including incarcerated youth. Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M. (2010); p. 27.

⁷ Rutman, D., Hubberstey, C., Feduniw, A., Brown, E. (2007). When Youth Age Out of Care—Where to from There. Final Report. Victoria, BC: Research Initiatives for Social Change Unit; p. 20.

⁸ Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Ruth, G., Keller, T., Havlicek, J., Bost, N. (2005, May). Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19. Chapin Hall. Chicago; p. 26.

Resources are the practical things that many Ontarians take for granted: shelter, food and equal access to education, health care and employment. Every child or young person has a right to these things, regardless of where they live, what racial background they come from, what gender they are or what challenges they face. Yet, young people in our systems often face barriers when it comes to accessing the basics, as well as the resources that can help them to reach their full potential.

For instance, children in child welfare care may experience more challenges than their peers. This can be a result of multiple placements (in foster homes, etc.), but may also be related to the original reasons for their removal from parental homes, reasons of emotional, physical or sexual abuse or due to neglect. These challenges include increased academic difficulties, mental health problems, attention deficit disorder (ADD), hyperactivity, developmental delays and aggression.¹

In a 2006 study of Crown Wards (children living in welfare care), 82% were found to have special needs, 40% were not progressing to the extent they should have been in school and 49% were found to have behavioural issues.² It has also been found that children in child welfare care who experience frequent moves are more likely to have considerable challenges when they make the transition out of care.³

Furthermore, a lack of financial, emotional and housing support during the pursuit of higher education can create major roadblocks to completing studies. Only 40% of Ontario youth in child welfare care complete high school⁴, compared to 80% of their peers who are not living in child welfare care. A disproportionate number of youth in child welfare care who do enrol in post-secondary education pursue apprenticeship and community college programs as opposed to university degrees and, thus, are more likely to end up in lower paying professions.

Studies have also found that youth aging out of child welfare care are much more likely than their peers to be unemployed.⁵ For example, a Midwest study found an unemployment rate of 52% for former youth in care who had reached 23-24 years of age.⁶ And difficulty finding work is only part of the issue. Insufficient earnings are yet another challenge. Many youth in the Promoting Positive Outcomes study (a longitudinal research project following youth who aged out of care in B.C.) worked in part-time jobs for fairly low wages.⁷ Only 38% of these youth who had left care within the past year reported employment earnings as their main source of income. At age 19, 90% of employed Midwest Study participants who were working were earning less than \$10,000 a year.⁸

It is hardly surprising then that youth who were formerly in child welfare care are more likely than their peers, who were not in care, to report social assistance as their primary source of income.⁹ And while social assistance is a helpful part of the social safety net, once a person has been receiving it for an extended period, it can be extremely challenging to become self-reliant. Several years out of care, the majority of the youth taking part in the Midwest study reported that social assistance was still their main source of income. Eighty-nine percent of custodial mothers and one-third of young men had received benefits from one or more needs-based government programs between the ages of 23-24.¹⁰

Young people formerly in child welfare care are also vulnerable to homelessness, especially directly after their Crown Ward status has been removed.¹¹ One study found that youth who exited care between ages 16 and 18 were markedly more likely to be in the homeless population as compared to those youth who exited after age 18.¹² A contributing reason for this is that provincial housing systems generally do not allow 16 to 17 year olds to live in subsidized housing on their own.¹³

All of this is to say that, while the institutions that serve our youth and the individuals who work for them are doing their best, the solutions and resources they are able to provide often merely scratch the surface of the problems. "Sometimes it feels like the public and the government want to do the bare minimum then wash their hands of us," says Alex, a Crown Ward from Thunder Bay.

As a province, we must do better. If we accept that children in Ontario's systems are truly children of the province, then the obligation to parent them does not rest with one system or Ministry, but with the entire government. Each Ministry can play a role in parenting their children by increasing the access youth in and from care have to practical resources and affording them access to opportunities to participate in their communities, province, country and world.

The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth hopes to encourage all Ministries to consider an audit of their activities with children in mind. Furthermore, like any parent, when any decision is made, how it will affect the well-being of their children should be top of mind. This shift in thinking and adoption of a "child-focused lens" would require the government and the Ontario Public Service to see children in provincial care as more than a group of young people in need of protection. Just as parents see their own children as individuals, it would require an understanding of youth in care as people with unique challenges and strengths, rich and diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, and varying talents and interests.

Rutman, D., Hubberstey, C., Feduniw, A., Brown, E. (2007); p. 20.

Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., Raap, M. (2010).¹⁰

Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. (2010, January); p. 27.

Serge, L., Eberle, M., Goldberg, M., Sullivan, S., & Dudding, P. (December 2002), p. 41.

Chau, S.B.Y., Gawliuk, M. (2009), p. 2.¹³

Programs and services already provided by government could be targeted to meet children where they already are, and to take them where they need to go to reach their full potential. Some Ministries have already begun the process of seeing their services through a child-focused lens. For example, after meeting with the Advocate's Office, the Ministry of Natural Resources will make a difference when they assist their children – the province's children – by offering them summer job opportunities in Ontario's Provincial Parks.

Other Ministries could take similar steps. The Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, for example, could ensure that Health Care Connect gives priority to their children – the province's children – when it comes to finding a family doctor as they leave provincial care. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing could ensure that their children – the province's children – have greater access to social housing by including them as a priority group on wait lists. The Ministry of Education could make a regulation change to ensure that their children – the province's children – are able to gain a measure of stability by remaining at the same school even if they are moving from foster home to foster home.

These are just some examples of steps that would be of little consequence to the public purse. Rather than beginning from scratch, many of these initiatives would merely involve tweaking current programs to include a stream that would benefit children in provincial care.

Ministries should also remain cognisant of the fact that, when young people make a request for support, it is more than a plea for basic survival. They are also asking that we send a message of sorts. Just as any child looks to their parents for validation of their self-worth, children in provincial care are asking the government to express and demonstrate their belief in them. Providing the resources they really need shows youth in care that we believe they are worth investing in, that they are valued, and that we know they can achieve great things.

Put Yourself in Their Shoes

How does a child in provincial care get job experience?

As a child, did you do simple chores in exchange for an allowance? Perhaps you mowed the lawn, shovelled the walkway, raked leaves or washed the car. When you got a little older, did you do some work for a neighbour or someone in your community? Did you get your first part-time job through a personal connection? This is the process through which most people growing up in Ontario gain their work experience and enter the labour market – but children and youth in provincial care often have a very different experience.

For example, Crown Wards move from home to home an average of six times – some many more. Foster parents, group home staff and other people who provide their care are guided by policies and practices that are not designed to teach employment-related skills. In many instances, these young people do not have the personal connections that will link them to first employment opportunities. At the same time, they are expected to live on their own from the age of 18. The opportunity to develop job skills, then, becomes a crucial resource.

*Connection:
Fostering A Sense Of
Belonging*

By understanding how youth in care define “family,” we can adapt the services we offer to support them in creating and maintaining ties. These custom-made support systems will help them to face life’s challenges.

Studies on child and youth development point to the importance of stable, positive adult relationships. And if you ask a young person who has come through life in one of Ontario's systems relatively intact what made the difference, they'll almost certainly talk about the importance of these and other types of connections.

Steven, a former Crown Ward from Toronto, sums up how well-meaning institutions often miss the mark when it comes to fostering a sense of belonging. "You guys are always trying to solve human problems with institutional solutions," he says. He points to an example of youth in foster care packing their belongings in garbage bags to move to a new home. "People thought that was demeaning. So the agency's solution was to buy us luggage. Don't get me wrong, I appreciated it, but it doesn't solve the real problem. The real reason we feel demeaned isn't because we don't have suitcases. It's because, sometimes, we feel rootless. We want a home, a place where we feel comfortable and where we belong."

All of us who consider ourselves successful as adults have had such places and such connections. They help us to form our identity and to know that we are not alone. They bind us to our communities and include us in society – and they can take many forms, from a family we were born into, to a club, a workplace, an association, a church community and/or a group of friends.

But, just as Steven has experienced, for many children and youth growing up in our systems, these points of connection can be few and far between. Each time a young person in foster care moves, they may change schools, groups of friends and certainly caregivers. In Ontario, Youth must leave their foster homes at the age of 18. They are often on their own, with only limited support from the system until the age of 21 when they are cut off from it all together.

Other systems that serve our children also work against positive, long-term connections with adults. This is not to say that the people working in the systems are unfeeling. On the contrary, the desire to build "reciprocal relationships" with those they serve is why many of them went into the field in the first place. However, in the area of children's mental health, for example, fragmented services and services that are time-limited due to funding create situations where relationships and feelings of belonging are extremely difficult to forge and maintain. Likewise, in many communities "safe spaces" for youth are under-staffed and face great financial strain, leading young people with a need to belong to drift to alternatives like gangs to fill a fundamental need. Stephanie, a young person who came into contact with the Advocate's Office through her experience with child welfare once told staff, "To be on your own doesn't have to mean being alone." She's right. There are many steps the province can take (and some which it has already taken) to ensure its children feel connected.

In our youth justice system the province has introduced a "relationship custody" model of service. It's a philosophy that encourages positive professional relationships between staff and youth and acknowledges the power such connections can have in helping young people to turn their lives around. It's a step in the right direction. However, even if a young person finds positive connections while in custody, once they are back in the community the relationships are often hard to maintain.

Over the years, the child welfare system has been working toward providing its Wards with more stable experiences in care by reducing the number of moves they experience and foster families they are placed with. This has been yet another positive step, but the fact still remains that, at the age of 18, these young people are made to leave their foster homes. Matching more children with "forever families" (permanent, adoptive families) can be even more beneficial – but adoptive families are not the solution for everyone. "Family" is not synonymous with "permanency," and certainly the concept of "family" is complicated for young people in care.

"You can choose your friends and you can choose your family," says Susan, a 21-year-old from Guelph, reflecting the feelings many youth in provincial care have on the issue. For them, family includes friends, social workers, foster parents, teachers, employers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, and other individuals. They have understood it to be a socially constructed concept and, in the absence of a stable nuclear family (a concept which is, in many ways, outdated), they have created their own families. We must work to create systems that allow and encourage them to do this.

As with the provision of resources, to be truly effective, the ways we support youth as they form connections will need to be as varied as the young people themselves. For some Crown Wards, adoptive families will be most appropriate, while, for other children in provincial care, the provision of safe places (such as community centres, religious groups and peer group activities) will have the greatest impact. By understanding how youth in care define "family," we can adapt the services we offer to support them in creating and maintaining ties. These custom-made support systems will then help them to face life's challenges.

Adults who come into contact with young people from all walks of life should also be aware of the individual impact they can have. The "One Person Principle" points to the fact that a single, solid connection has the potential to influence a person's course in life.

Put Yourself in Their Shoes

The "One Person Principle"

Think for a moment about your own youth. Who in your life influenced the positive choices you made? Was it a parent? A brother or sister? A teacher or coach? A pastor or an elder? Most of us can name these important figures and can even pinpoint the moment one of them gave us an opportunity that changed the path we were on, or said or did something that transformed the way we thought about ourselves.

Maybe you've even had the experience of interacting with a young person, then having them come back to you years later to say something like, "Remember when I was 12 and you told me I was a good writer? Well, now I'm a journalist." We can all have this type of profound influence on the children we come into contact with.

Youth in provincial care call this the "One Person Principle" and recognize that they need these types of connections to succeed.

*Voice:
Helping Youth To Speak Out,
To Be Heard & To Gain Control*

“When you **feel** like you have no control over your **life**, why bother making a **plan**?”

While resources and connections are both essential, there is one remaining component that is just as crucial: voice. After all, the other two components hinge on it. With voice, young people can find the strength to use the resources and connections they have. Without voice, connection and resources remain untapped.

As children in foster care are shuffled from home to home and worker to worker outside their control, as choices are taken away from young people in the criminal justice system, as young Aboriginal people are labelled by society as “destined to go nowhere,” it’s hardly surprising that they begin to feel a loss of agency and control – something that can lead to feelings of dehumanization and hopelessness. “When you feel like you have no control over your life, why bother making a plan?” says Jason, a young person in the youth justice system.

Cindy, a former Crown Ward, has this to add, “As a Crown Ward, many things were apparent to me as young as three. The first was that the province had the power to take you away from your family and declare that your parents were no longer your parents. This also made very clear the fact that you are powerless and that you must answer to and obey the government’s decisions. This is a fact that many children and youth have to live with. I must say this sparked a submissive character within myself. I spent years obeying and keeping my mouth shut.”

The process of service delivery in the province is often top-down and institutional, leading many children in provincial care to experience the same feelings of powerlessness Cindy did. For example, in children’s mental health services, care is commonly offered from a medical model framework rather than from a “recovery model.” This means that a professional makes a diagnosis and sets out a treatment plan for the young person, most often without seeking their input or making them a partner in the process. This top-down approach is never in the best interest of the patient, but it is especially problematic for young people who have already experienced a great loss of control in life.

When we involve youth in decisions that affect them, their life experience is validated, their decision-making skills are honed, their self confidence is fostered and their sense of hope is often restored. Conversely, taking choices out of young people’s hands is demoralizing and at times dehumanizing – not only for the children involved, but for those delivering the service as well.

Put Yourself in Their Shoes

The good news is that these processes can change easily, quickly and at little cost. Giving youth a voice means not only granting them opportunities to speak but, more importantly, making sure that they are being listened to and truly heard. They need to see that their words have an impact. This cannot be just about creating advisory committees and youth engagement projects. This type of listening requires service providers, caregivers and policy makers to be engaged with the children they serve and to be open to learning from them. It requires participating in an ongoing dialogue, and it needs to be an integral part of service delivery.

Naomi, a young person who spent 10 years in the province's mental health and child welfare systems says, "This process of listening and speaking is about working together. It involves sometimes pushing from behind, sometimes being pushed, sometimes leading, sometimes being led, and sometimes just walking along... but it's about being on the journey together."

This idea of walking side-by-side with youth can and should play itself out in policy development, as well as in practice. We must learn to recognize that children and youth in provincial care carry knowledge that is legitimate – in fact, precious. When we honour their right to express their views about the policies and institutions that affect them, we will all benefit from their wisdom.

What's it like to be a child coming into provincial care?

Try for a moment to imagine what it's like for a young person entering one of Ontario's social services systems – a child in foster care, perhaps.

This child has grown up in fear and uncertainty, in a situation she's powerless to change. It's possible that violent outbursts, emotional blackmail, physical assault and/or chronic neglect are part of everyday life. She feels like her world is outside her control.

One day – perhaps when she is 8, or 10, or 12 years old – someone steps in. The child gets a surprise visit from a child welfare worker at school who asks questions she's afraid to answer. She may be told to take off her clothes so she can be checked for bruises or other injuries. If the situation is judged harmful and/or dangerous for her, she is forced to leave everything familiar behind. She is placed in care and becomes part of a system with rules and regulations seemingly outside anyone's control, let alone her own.

She might spend a night or two in one foster home. She then moves again to a more permanent placement. Family court proceedings take place, and she may be invited to attend. A judge is present and the child may speak if she wishes. She has a lawyer, but rather than feeling reassured by this she thinks, "People who are bad need lawyers. Does that mean I'm bad?"

A decision is made about her long-term care. The worker who removed her from her home is replaced with yet another worker she doesn't know. He drops her off, with her few possessions, at yet another new home filled with strangers. During her time in foster care she will move at least four more times, likely experiencing an even greater feeling of lost control each time she is uprooted. And this is when things are supposed to be getting easier...

*The Time To Invest In
Our Kids Is Now...*

The opportunity
to create a vibrant,
viable children's
service system
exists today.

Walking side-by-side with these remarkable young people, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth has found a truth: what some say is impossible to achieve is, in fact, possible.

The Advocate's Office is humbled by the courage and strength of the young people it serves – many of whom have set a positive course for themselves in the face of doubt, discouragement and the barriers that their life histories have presented them with. Staff members consistently hear these youth express a desire to make a difference for those coming through the systems after them. They often frame this desire as "giving back" – a remarkable turn of phrase, considering that the systems have largely, from their point of view, failed them. However, these young people should not be the fortunate ones who find their way through pure courage and good luck.

Don't we all wish to see children in provincial care live full, healthy lives and grow into strong, independent adults? If the answer is yes, the task before us should be crystal clear. The opportunity to create a vibrant, viable children's service system exists today. To make it a reality, we, as a province, must choose to have the will to provide all of our most disadvantaged young people with the unique combination of resources, connections and voice they need to succeed.

Building such a system will be no easy task – especially in tough economic times – but despite our often polarized views, we can do it. If there is anything we can come together on, it is our children.

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